

Psychology for all

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In *Psychology in its place* (2008) John Radford explores and attempts to initiate a debate on what is or should be the place and role of psychology in Higher Education, primarily as a main subject for a first degree. In this paper I would like to raise the stakes, and argue that Higher Education should provide a certain form of practical psychology for all students, not only those who study psychology as a main subject.

There is a striking imbalance in present education (at all levels) between the amount of time, resources and attention dedicated to the study of the world on the one side, and to the subjects that constitute personal life and experience on the other. Students have opportunities to learn about mathematics, literature, geography, science and so on, but little chance to learn about themselves and the ways they can experience and relate to their environment. Such an attitude may have served the purpose of education in the past, but its inadequacy in the modern world is becoming increasingly transparent. There is a profound awareness that we live in a time of rapid and dramatic changes (see, e.g. Inglehart, 1990). Some of those relevant to this subject are summarised by The Citizenship Foundation:

'the increasingly complex nature of our society, the greater cultural diversity and the apparent loss of a value consensus, combined with the collapse of traditional support mechanisms such as extended families'.

(as cited in Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1998, p. 17)

These changes, of course, may increase opportunities and choice and are not necessarily something negative. However, they also increase confusion, insecurity, anxiety and personal responsibility, which can be too much of a burden for some individuals, groups or indeed whole societies. The Office for National Statistics (2001) states that one

in four British adults experience at least one diagnosable mental health problem in any one year, and one in six experiences this at any given time. In these circumstances, young people can be easily influenced by forces that do not have their well-being as a priority (e.g. peer pressure, media, extreme religious or political groups) or choose solutions that may provide short-term security and relief, but are destructive and self-defeating in the long run (e.g. alcohol and drug abuse). Moreover, attributes like class, gender, nationality, cultural or religious background, affluence and position that used to be decisive regarding employment, relationships and other aspects of life are losing their significance, while personal qualities are becoming more important. We have to rely on ourselves more than ever, so personal development and education that may contribute to this cannot be considered a luxury anymore, but a necessity.

In the last hundred or so years, we have witnessed and benefited from unprecedented technological development. Life has changed beyond recognition. With such a remarkable success it is easy to forget that technological development should only be a means to an end not an end in itself. Indeed, people and their development seem to be left behind. This discrepancy is transparent at every level: individual, social, organisational and environmental. It is a somewhat naïve assumption that psychological development will spontaneously follow a technological one. Research shows that although the wealth in the Western world has increased dramatically, well-being and happiness have not improved since the fifties (Layard, 2006). Yet, education about psychological and personal aspects of human life seems still largely neglected. With some notable exceptions, most of the present attempts to

bring psychology into education are usually limited to either academic research that has little relevance for students themselves and those around them, or to 'crisis prevention' programs that focus on particular problems of some students, with the consequence that they lack comprehensiveness and universality. Personal Development Planning (PDP) has been introduced presumably to fill this gap, but in practice it has much more to do with professional than personal development (e.g. how to write CV). Radford suggests that *responsible autonomy* should be an educational ideal. But, what has been done so far to foster responsible autonomy in students? Increasingly, Higher Education treats students as consumers, and students treat educational institutions as service providers. This may seem natural in a market economy driven context, but the flip side is that education is becoming reduced to passing exams and getting a diploma. As a consequence, more and more people get Higher Education degrees, but at the same time, they seem less and less prepared for life, personally, professionally and socially. My experience of running personal development modules in Higher Education confirms that the level of what can be only called psychological illiteracy, even among psychology students, is alarming. Yet, there is a wealth of knowledge and skills that psychology has accumulated in this respect. Why this knowledge and skills are not transmitted to students on a larger scale remains a mystery. Surely, not only individuals, but society as a whole would benefit from *responsible autonomy* (that, in its best, should mean being in charge of our mental and behavioural faculties, rather than just cognitive autonomy).

It is sometimes believed that the best way to provide this type of education is through the atmosphere and attitude of educational institution and through already existing disciplines. There is no doubt that these factors are important for students' personal development. However, there are several reasons why such a provision may not be sufficient: it cannot be comprehensive and systematic, it

is often fragmented and lacks coherence, and it is difficult to organise, coordinate and appraise (Popovic, 2002, 13–14). In addition, academics are typically reluctant to take responsibility in this respect, and prefer to stick to their own subjects. Yet, as Mosher and Sprinthall point out, 'learning about Macbeth's emotions is not ... systematically learning about one's own emotions' (1970, p. 915). Only time-tabled psychological education can satisfy the necessary conditions for this type of work: trained facilitators, comprehensiveness, structure and organisation, high quality and equal status. Students would certainly benefit from a time-slot in their programme dedicated specifically to this field.

There are some possible objections to bringing psychological education to all that need to be addressed. It is sometimes claimed that this type of education may endanger academic neutrality: it should be left to individuals themselves to take care of their personal development and well-being. But this is based on a false premise. By not providing such education we do not remain neutral. In fact, we are implicitly taking a stand – namely that studying and developing ourselves is less important than studying and developing the world 'outside'.

Another objection is that this type of education may lead to indoctrination, and lead people astray. This is a serious concern. After all, when, for example, behaviourist or humanistic psychologies were implemented in the domains of upbringing and educating, results were not always desirable. Nowadays, so-called positive psychology speaks about increasing well-being or happiness as the aim, even if no philosopher or psychologist has come up with a working definition of well-being or happiness that is suitable and can be applied to all. So, what if we get it wrong again? This is not inevitable though. An open-ended aim such as already mentioned *responsible autonomy* would avoid this problem. The purpose of such an education should be to enable individuals to make

informed choices and carry them out, rather than making choices for them.

Finally, some believe that Higher Education should be mainly about academic research rather than practical matters. However, as Radford points out, we need to move beyond 'a false dichotomy' between academics and professionals, especially in the psychology field. Unlike research in some other disciplines, psychological one cannot be carried in isolation. Psychologists are already involved and work with people and it is only fair to give something back. Otherwise, psychology as a discipline is in danger of becoming irrelevant. After all, what is the point of research if it does not lead to making life better?

Anecdotal evidence suggests that students themselves would be keen to have this type of education. Many young people enthusiastically start the psychology degree with an idea that it will help them to understand themselves and other people better. Most of them get quickly disillusioned when they discover that it is not what they expected and has little relevance to real situations that they experience in everyday lives. It does not come as a surprise that programmes and modules with the content they can relate to directly are well-attended and popular.

Instead of a conclusion, I will summarise the main points of this proposal:

- Psychological education should be available to all students, irrespective of a main

subject they study.

- Psychological education should be about relevant topics that affect everyday life (such as handling emotions, constructive thinking, dealing with stress, resolving intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts, goal setting and motivation, etc.).
- Psychology graduates should also be trained to facilitate this type of education.
- More research should be carried out on topics that can really contribute to the constructive development of individuals and societies.

It is easy to see many potential advantages of an education that would help students to understand themselves and others better, and be more in charge of their lives. An additional benefit is worth mentioning though – namely a greater employability of psychology graduates. As Radford points out (2007), although psychology is a very popular discipline, most graduates will never work as researchers or psychologists. Bringing psychological education to Higher Education on a large scale would enable a much greater number of graduates to find a job related to their training. So, this might be indeed a win-win situation.

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